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## DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

### DO WE NEED A "SUPERORGANIC"?

NOTHING irritates a student of culture more than to have the methods of the exact sciences flaunted in his face as a salutary antidote to his own supposedly slipshod methods. He feels that he deals with an entirely different order of phenomena, that direct comparison between the two groups of disciplines is to be ruled out of court. It is some such irritation that seems to have served as the emotional impetus of Dr. Kroeber's very interesting discussion of "The Superorganic" (pp. 163-213 of this volume). Many anthropologists will be disposed to sympathize with him and to rejoice that he has squarely taken up the cudgel for a rigidly historical and anti-biological interpretation of culture. His analysis of the essential difference between organic heredity and social tradition is surely sound in the main, though doubts suggest themselves on special points in this part of the discussion. The common fallacy of confounding the cultural advancement of a group with the potential or inherent intellectual power of its individual members is also clearly exposed. There is little in Dr. Kroeber's general standpoint and specific statements that I should be disposed to quarrel with. Yet I feel that on at least two points of considerable theoretical importance he has allowed himself to go further than he is warranted in going. I suspect that he may to some extent have been the victim of a too rigidly classificatory or abstractionist tendency.

In the first place, I believe that Dr. Kroeber greatly overshoots the mark in his complete elimination of the peculiar influence of individuals on the course of history, even if by that term is understood culture history, the history of social activities with practically no reference to biographical data as such. All individuals tend to impress themselves on their social environment and, though generally to an infinitesimal degree, to make their individuality count in the direction taken by the never-ceasing flux that the form and content of social activity are inevitably subject to. It is true that the content of an individual's mind is so overwhelmingly moulded by the social traditions to which he is heir that the purely individual contribution of even markedly original minds is apt to seem swamped in the whole of culture. Further-

more the dead level of compromise necessitated by the clashing of thousands of wills, few of them of compelling potency, tends to sink the social importance of any one of them into insignificance. All this is true in the main. And yet it is always the individual that really thinks and acts and dreams and revolts. Those of his thoughts, acts, dreams, and rebellions that somehow contribute in sensible degree to the modification or retention of the mass of typical reactions called culture we term social data; the rest, though they do not, psychologically considered, in the least differ from these, we term individual and pass by as of no historical or social moment. It is highly important to note that the differentiation of these two types of reaction is essentially arbitrary, resting, as it does, entirely on a principle of selection. The selection depends on the adoption of a scale of values. Needless to say, the threshold of the social (or historical) *versus* the individual shifts according to the philosophy of the evaluator or interpreter. I find it utterly inconceivable to draw a sharp and eternally valid dividing line between them. Clearly, then, "individual" reactions constantly spill over into and lend color to "social" reactions.

Under these circumstances how is it possible for the social to escape the impress of at least certain individualities? It seems to me that it requires a social determinism amounting to a religion to deny to individuals all directive power, all culture-moulding influence. Is it conceivable, for instance, that the dramatic events that we summarize under the heading of the Napoleonic Period and which are inextricably bound up with the personality of Napoleon are a matter of indifference from the point of view of the political, economic, and social development of Europe during that period and since? Would the administration of the law in New Orleans be what it now is if there had not existed a certain individual of obscure origin who hailed from Corsica? It goes without saying that in this, as in similar cases, the determining influence of specific personalities is, as a rule, grossly exaggerated by the average historian; but a tendency to deprecate too great an insistence on the individual as such is not the same thing as the attempt to eliminate him as a cultural factor altogether. Shrewdly enough, Dr. Kroeber chooses his examples from the realm of inventions and scientific theories. Here it is relatively easy to justify a sweeping social determinism in view of a certain general inevitability in the course of the acquirement of knowledge. This inevitability, however, does not altogether reside, as Dr. Kroeber seems to imply, in a social "force" but, to a very large extent, in the fixity, conceptually speaking, of the objective world. This fixity

forms the sharpest of predetermined grooves for the unfolding of man's knowledge. Had he occupied himself more with the religious, philosophic, aesthetic, and crudely volitional activities and tendencies of man, I believe that Dr. Kroeber's case for the non-cultural significance of the individual would have been a far more difficult one to make. No matter how much we minimize exaggerated claims, I fail to see how we can deny a determining and, in some cases, even extraordinarily determining cultural influence to a large number of outstanding personalities. With all due reverence for social science, I would not even hesitate to say that many a momentous cultural development or tendency, particularly in the religious and aesthetic spheres, is at last analysis a partial function or remote consequence of the temperamental peculiarities of a significant personality. As the social units grow larger and larger, the probabilities of the occurrence of striking and influential personalities grow vastly. Hence it is that the determining influence of individuals is more easily demonstrated in the higher than in the lower levels of culture. One has only to think seriously of what such personalities as Aristotle, Jesus, Mahomet, Shakespeare, Goethe, Beethoven mean in the history of culture to hesitate to commit oneself to a completely non-individualistic interpretation of history. I do not believe for a moment that such personalities are merely the cat's-paws of general cultural drifts. No doubt much, perhaps even the greater part, of what history associates with their names is merely an individually colored version of what they found ready to hand in their social, philosophic, religious, or aesthetic milieu, *but not entirely*. If such an interpretation of the significance of the individual introduces a repugnant element of "accident" into the history of culture, so much the worse for the social scientists who fear "accident."

The second point in Dr. Kroeber's essay that I find myself compelled to take exception to concerns his interpretation of the nature of social phenomena. If I understand him rightly, he predicates a certain social "force" whose gradual unfolding is manifested in the sequence of socially significant phenomena we call history. The social is builded out of the organic, but is not entirely resolvable into it, hence it implies the presence of an unknown principle which transcends the organic, just as the organic, while similarly builded out of the inorganic, is not resolvable into it but harbors a new and distinctive force that works itself out in organic phenomena. I consider the analogy a false one. Moreover, I do not believe that Dr. Kroeber has rightly seized upon the true nature of the opposition between history and non-historical science.

The analogy is a false one because, while the organic can be demonstrated to consist objectively of the inorganic plus an increment of obscure origin and nature, the social is merely a certain philosophically arbitrary but humanly immensely significant *selection* out of the total mass of phenomena ideally resolvable into inorganic, organic, and psychic processes. The social is but a name for those reactions or types of reaction that depend for their perpetuation on a cumulative technique of transference, that known as social inheritance. This technique, however, does not depend for its operation on any specifically new "force," but, as far as we can tell at present, merely implies a heightening of psychic factors. No doubt the growth of self-consciousness is largely involved in the gradual building up of this technique of social transference. While we may not be able to define satisfactorily the precise nature of self-consciousness or trace its genesis, it is certainly no more mysterious a development in the history of mind than earlier stages in this most obscure of all evolutions. In short, its appearance involves no new force, merely a refinement and complication of an earlier force or of earlier forces. Hence social activities, which I define as a selected group of reactions dependent at last analysis on the growth of self-consciousness, do not result from the coming into being of a new objective principle of being. The differential characteristic of social science lies thus entirely in a modulus of values, not in an accession of irresolvably distinct subject matter. There seems to be a chasm between the organic and the inorganic which only the rigid mechanists pretend to be able to bridge. There seems to be an unbridgeable chasm, in immediacy of experience, between the organic and the psychic, despite the undeniable correlations between the two. Dr. Kroeber denies this *en passant*, but neither his nor my philosophy of the nature of mind is properly germane to the subject under discussion. Between the psychic and the social there is no chasm in the above sense at all. The break lies entirely in the principle of selection that respectively animates the two groups of sciences. Social science is not psychology, not because it studies the resultants of a superpsychic or superorganic force, but because its terms are differently demarcated.

At this point I begin to fear misunderstanding. It might almost appear that I considered, with certain psychological students of culture, the fundamental problem of social science to consist of the resolution of the social into the psychic, of the unraveling of the tangled web of psychology that may be thought to underlie social phenomena. This conception of social science I have as much abhorrence of Dr. Kroeber as

There may be room for a "social psychology," but it is neither an historical nor a social science. It is merely a kind of psychology, of somewhat uncertain credentials, for the present; at any rate, it is, like individual psychology, a conceptual science. It is quite true that the phenomena of social science, as claimed by Dr. Kroeber, are irresolvable into the terms of psychology or organic science, but this irresolvability is not, as Dr. Kroeber seems to imply, a conceptual one. *It is an experiential one.* This type of irresolvability is *toto caelo* distinct from that which separates the psychic and the organic or the organic and the inorganic, where we are confronted by true conceptual incommensurables.

What I mean by "experiential irresolvability" is something that meets us at every turn. I shall attempt to illustrate it by an example from a totally different science. Few sciences are so clearly defined as regards scope as geology. It would ordinarily be classed as a natural science. Aside from palaeontology, which we may eliminate, it does entirely without the concepts of the social, psychic, or organic. It is, then, a well-defined science of purely inorganic subject matter. As such it is conceptually resolvable, if we carry our reductions far enough, into the more fundamental sciences of physics and chemistry. But no amount of conceptual synthesis of the phenomena we call chemical or physical would, in the absence of previous experience, enable us to construct a science of geology. This science depends for its *raison d'être* on a series of unique experiences, directly sensed or inferred, clustering about an entity, the earth, which from the conceptual standpoint of physics is as absurdly accidental or irrelevant as a tribe of Indians or John Smith's breakfast. The basis of the science is, then, firmly grounded in the uniqueness of particular events. To be precise, geology looks in two directions. In so far as it occupies itself with abstract masses and forces, it is a conceptual science, for which specific instances as such are irrelevant. In so far as it deals with particular features of the earth's surface, say a particular mountain chain, and aims to reconstruct the probable history of such features, it is not a conceptual science at all. In methodology, strange as this may seem at first blush, it is actually nearer, in this aspect, to the historical sciences. It is, in fact, a species of history, only the history moves entirely in the inorganic sphere. In practice, of course, geology is a mixed type of science, now primarily conceptual, now primarily descriptive of a selected chunk of reality. Between the data of the latter aspect and the concepts of the former lies that yawning abyss that must forever, in the very nature of things, divorce the real world of directly experienced phenomena from the ideal world of conceptual science.

Returning to social science, it is clear that the leap from psychology to social science is just of this nature. Any social datum is resolvable, at least theoretically, into psychological concepts. But just as little as the most accurate and complete mastery of physics and chemistry enables us to synthesize a science of geology, does an equivalent mastery of the conceptual science of psychology—which, by the way, nobody possesses or is likely to possess for a long time to come—enable us to synthesize the actual nature and development of social institutions or other historical data. These must be directly experienced and, as already pointed out, selected from the endless mass of human phenomena according to a principle of values. Historical science thus differs from natural science, either wholly or as regards relative emphasis, in its adherence to the real world of phenomena, not, like the latter, to the simplified and abstract world of ideal concepts. It strives to value the unique or individual, not the universal. "Individual" may naturally here mean any directly experienced entity or group of entities—the earth, France, the French language, the French Republic, the romantic movement in literature, Victor Hugo, the Iroquois Indians, some specific Iroquois clan, all Iroquois clans, all American Indian clans, all clans of primitive peoples. None of these terms, *as such*, has any relevancy in a purely conceptual world, whether organic or inorganic, physical or psychic. Properly speaking, "history" includes far more than what we ordinarily call historical or social science. The latter is merely the "historical" (in our wider sense), not conceptual, treatment of certain selected aspects of the psychic world of man.

Are not, then, such concepts as a clan, a language, a priesthood comparable in lack of individual connotation to the ideal concepts of natural science? Are not the laws applicable to these historical concepts as conceptually valid as those of natural science? Logically it is perhaps difficult, if not impossible, to make a distinction, as the same mental processes of observation, classification, inference, generalization, and so on, are brought into play. Philosophically, however, I believe the two types of concepts are utterly distinct. The social concepts are convenient summaries of a strictly limited range of phenomena, each element of which has real value. Relatively to the concept "clan" a particular clan of a specific Indian tribe has undeniable value as an historical entity. Relatively to the concept "crystal" a particular ruby in the jeweler's shop has no relevancy except by way of illustration. It has no intrinsic scientific value. Were all crystals existent at this moment suddenly disintegrated, the science of crystallography would still be valid, provided the physical and chemical forces that make possible the growth

of another crop of crystals remain in the world. Were all clans now existent annihilated, it is highly debatable, to say the least, whether the science of sociology, in so far as it occupied itself with clans, would have prognostic value. The difference between the two groups of concepts becomes particularly clear if we consider negative instances. If, out of one hundred clans, ninety-nine obeyed a certain sociological "law," we would justly flatter ourselves with having made a particularly neat and sweeping generalization; our "law" would have validity, even if we never succeeded in "explaining" the one exception. But if, out of one million selected experiments intended to test a physical law, 999,999 corroborated the law and one persistently refused to do so, after all disturbing factors had been eliminated, we would be driven to seek a new formulation of our law. There is something deeper involved here than relative accuracy. The social "law" is an abbreviation or formula for a finite number of evaluated phenomena, and rarely more than an approximately accurate formula at that; the natural "law" is a universally valid formulation of a regular sequence observable in an indefinitely large number of phenomena selected at random. With the multiplication of instances social "laws" become more and more blurred in outline, natural "laws" more and more rigid. However, the clarification of the sphere and concepts of social science in its more generalized aspects is a difficult problem that we can not fully discuss here.<sup>1</sup>

I strongly suspect that Dr. Kroeber will not find me to differ essentially from him in my conception of history. What I should like to emphasize, however, is that it is perfectly possible to hold this view of history without invoking the aid of a "superorganic." Moreover, had the uniqueness of historical phenomena been as consistently clear to him as he himself would require, it would be difficult to understand why he should have insisted on eliminating the individual in the narrow sense of the word.

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#### THE AUTONOMY OF THE SOCIAL.

IN a stimulating disquisition on "The Superorganic" (this journal, April-June, 1917, pp. 163-214) Dr. Kroeber once more returns to the topic which of late he has made peculiarly his own.

<sup>1</sup> For a penetrating analysis of the fundamental distinction between historical and natural science I strongly urge all anthropologists, and social scientists generally, who are interested in method to refer to H. Rickert's difficult but masterly book on *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung; eine Einleitung in die historischen Wissenschaften*. I have been greatly indebted to it.